

Engaging Families in the High School Transition: Initial Findings From a Continuous Improvement Initiative

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Abstract

This case study focuses on one district's process of continuous improvement in family engagement. The improvement effort addresses the point at which family engagement tends to decline precipitously and students are particularly vulnerable—the transition into high school. In this article we analyze the implementation of a continuous improvement approach to engaging families as students make this critical transition. In particular, we describe (a) the variation in schools' family engagement activities and participation in cycles of inquiry, (b) the challenges identified by schools to implementing the family engagement approach and cycles of inquiry, and (c) the learning that occurred for both the participating schools and the district–university partnership team through the continuous improvement process.

Key Words: family engagement, transition to high school, continuous improvement cycle, district–university partnership, parents, ninth grade

Introduction and Literature Review

Although consensus is growing that districts and schools must move beyond “random acts of family involvement” (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010, p. 1),

much remains to be done to support systematic and sustained family engagement. The “Dual Capacity-Building Framework” (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013) has focused attention on the ways that families and school staff need to learn from each other to create the kinds of school–family partnerships that will support student learning success, but translating this framework into systematic practice remains a challenge. This article explores the promises and challenges of applying the continuous improvement approach as a way of enacting the Dual Capacity-Building Framework in secondary schools.

Despite recognition that family engagement is a necessary part of school reform and improvement, there has been very little effort to clarify how this might be enacted. Bryk and his colleagues (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Lupescu, & Easton, 2010) identified partnership with families as one of the pillars of school improvement, but there has been little attention to family engagement within the continuous improvement in education community (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015). Continuous improvement is “the act of integrating quality improvement into the daily work of individuals in the system” (Park, Hironaka, Carver, & Nordstrum, 2013, p. 5). Park et al. (2013) emphasize that organizations engaging in continuous improvement regularly and consistently integrate the process into the daily work of individuals within an organization, helping people to see problems of practice as products or elements of a system. More specifically, the six improvement principles outlined by Bryk et al. (2015) include: (a) “make the work problem-specific and user-centered”; (b) “focus on variation in performance”; (c) “see the system that produces the current outcomes”; (d) emphasize measurement to “improve at scale”; (e) “use disciplined inquiry to drive improvement”; and (f) “accelerate learning through networked communities” (pp. 12–17).

Using a continuous improvement approach to strengthen family and community engagement, while consistent with the Dual Capacity-Building Framework, is neither simple nor easy. In their analysis of the need for standard work processes in complex organizations such as school districts, Bryk et al. (2015) point out that “students may fall through the cracks as they move from one school to another” (p. 49), comparing the transition to the shift change at the hospital when patients are particularly at risk. In schools, transitions have long been identified as a time when students are most vulnerable (e.g., Eccles, Midgeley, & Adler, 1984; Langenkamp, 2010). To date, there has been significant research about the important role of family engagement for students transitioning into kindergarten (e.g., Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Pianta, Cox, Taylor, & Early, 1999), but there has been less research attention to family engagement during the transition from middle to high school.

Numerous studies have reported a decline in family engagement as children progress from elementary to middle and high school (Simon, 2004; Spera, 2005), and secondary schools across the country struggle in addressing challenges to effectively engage families in their children's education (Epstein, Sanders, & Sheldon, 2009; Hoover-Dempsey, Ice, & Whitaker, 2009). Studies of parental involvement in urban high schools identified ways that high school policies and practices pushed away parents who sought to engage in support of their children's academic progress (Wallace, 2013; Williams & Sanchez, 2012).

In urban areas and with historically underserved families, especially, schools are not generally fostering the kind of relationships with families that promote collaboration. The power asymmetries between urban parents and school leaders identified by Fine (1993) have not abated significantly. Researchers have argued that with diverse communities, educators tend to encourage parent involvement in school-centric activities rather than establish collaborative relationships with families and engage them as equals in support of their children's schooling (Auerbach, 2010; Doucet, 2011; Olivos, 2006). These interactions are often framed by educators' deficit-driven perceptions of minority families (Cooper, 2009) and, therefore, do not position low-income minority families in ways to best support their children's academic achievement. School leaders tend to label immigrant families as "hard to reach" rather than recognizing how their own practices "inhibit accessibility for certain parents" (Crozier & Davies, 2007, p. 296). Although some schools have successfully built the kind of relationships and a bilingual community where immigrant families feel valued and welcomed (e.g., Durand & Perez, 2013), immigrant families often feel that school leaders do not want to listen to their needs and concerns (e.g., Ramirez, 2003).

Given the failure of many urban schools to recognize family assets and engage families in ways that genuinely encourage their voices and seek to encourage and empower their participation in decision-making, many researchers and practitioners have emphasized the importance of more community-based models of parental engagement (e.g., Alameda-Lawson, Lawson, & Lawson, 2013; Lawson & Alameda-Lawson, 2012; Warren, 2005; Warren, Hong, Rubin, & Uy, 2009). At the high school level, a recent intervention to increase family engagement for high school success (Harvard Family Research Project and United Way Worldwide, 2011) was developed mainly for use by large community organizations, such as local United Way offices, rather than by schools, and it did not focus on the feeder (middle) and receiver (high) schools that are essential parts of the transition process.

While community-based initiatives are essential in the work of empowering historically underserved families to engage in "the critical and serious

work of rethinking educational structures and practices” (Fine, 1993, p. 683) in ways that schools themselves cannot facilitate, it is important to recognize that even secondary schools can become more effective in engaging diverse families directly in ways that are associated with improved student outcomes. When secondary schools reach out to engage parents, there is evidence that parents respond and become engaged (Epstein, 2011; Green, Walker, Hoover-Dempsey, & Sandler, 2007). Simon (2004) found that various forms of high school outreach to students’ families were associated with higher levels of family educational support to students. Meta-analyses conducted by Jeynes (2003, 2005, 2007, 2012) and Fan and Chen (2001), as well as major overviews (e.g., Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007), point to overall positive effects of family engagement on specific academic outcomes across scores of studies, though Mattingly and colleagues (2002) point out the need for more rigorous quasi-experimental and experimental studies to confirm these findings.

Even when schools attempt to involve families in students’ transition to high school, they do not always succeed in coordinating efforts effectively among the families and the sending and receiving schools in ways that will lead to improved student outcomes (Crosnoe, 2009; Smith, 1997). In a study of National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) member schools, Mac Iver, Epstein, Sheldon, and Fonseca (2015) concluded that “even among a group of schools actively implementing a systematic approach to engage families, considerable work remains to enable educators to engage families during the critical transition to high school in ways that help improve student outcomes in the ninth grade” (p. 27). Much work remains to be done in helping middle and high schools to engage families during this critical transition.

The Ninth Grade Transition

Why is ninth grade and the transition into high school so important? Numerous studies have shown that ninth grade academic performance is critical for on-time and college-ready high school graduation (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). It seems obvious that passing ninth grade courses and earning credits necessary for promotion and graduation are proximal causes of graduating on time. Nevertheless, most urban high schools were not paying sufficient attention to this indicator or making the necessary interventions until results of research studies became widely disseminated (Allensworth, 2013). Even if students were able to recover from multiple failures in ninth grade and graduate from high school, the damage to their high school GPAs due to those failures often had detrimental effects on their ability to enroll in four-year colleges (Mac Iver & Messel, 2012). Research also indicated that course failure in ninth grade was closely, though not completely, linked

to attendance problems (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Mac Iver & Messel, 2012). Further, attendance problems are exacerbated by behavior problems that lead to suspension from school (e.g., Balfanz et al., 2007).

Attention to the “ABCs of staying on track to graduation” (Mac Iver & Messel, 2013)—attendance, behavior, and course performance—has now become widespread throughout the U.S. (e.g., Heppen & Therriault, 2008; Jerald, 2006; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Pinkus, 2008). But there has been much less attention paid by schools and districts to engaging families, especially those from low-income and immigrant communities, during this critical transition to high school when family engagement tends to decline. This is rather surprising, given the influence that families can have on the critical indicator of school attendance and the evidence that outreach by schools to engage families around attendance can have positive effects on student attendance rates (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, 2006; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Theory of Change

The preceding review suggests that one important approach for improving ninth grade student outcomes is giving more systematic attention to engaging families and equipping them with information and strategies for supporting their students as they begin high school. Our theory of change or logic model (see Figure 1) can be summarized in four steps:

1. Provision of professional development for planning family engagement (including tools and templates for district leaders and school teams focused on engaging families to support students in the transition from middle to high school) will increase school teams’ capacity to reach out to all families (Epstein, 2005a, 2011; Sanders & Lewis, 2005; Sanders, Sheldon, & Epstein, 2005; Sanders & Simon, 2002).
2. Well-planned practices in schools’ family engagement action plans will lead to improved outreach to all families to increase their knowledge, skills, and motivation to support their students in the transition to high school and through Grade 9 (Epstein et al., 2009; Sheldon, 2003, 2005; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004).
3. Increased family support, monitoring, and teacher–parent and student–parent interactions will lead to better student attendance and more homework completion in the first year of high school (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Sheldon, 2007; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).
4. Students’ higher attendance and homework completion will lead to increased course passing rates in the ninth grade year, which will lead to higher rates of on-time graduation from high school (e.g., Allensworth, 2013; Allensworth & Easton, 2007).

This theory of change led to the development of a continuous improvement initiative within a district that was already committed to a systematic, goal-oriented approach to family engagement.

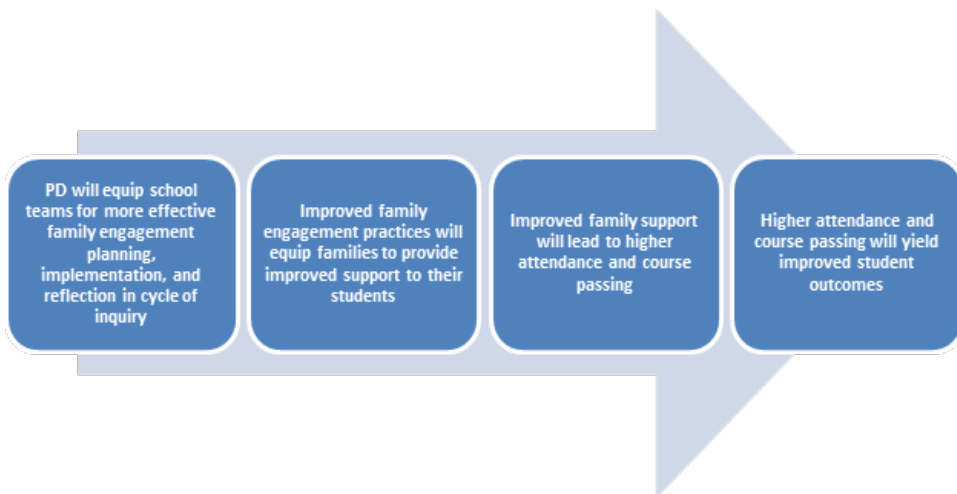


Figure 1. How improved family engagement practices contribute to improved student achievement.

Background on the District and University Partners

The continuous improvement initiative analyzed in this case study involves a partnership between Seattle Public Schools (SPS) and the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University focused on increasing family engagement as students transition into high school. NNPS was established in the mid-1990s, based on research conducted since 1981 with the state of Maryland, Baltimore City Public Schools, and other states, districts, and schools across the country, on the nature and effects of school, family, and community partnerships (Epstein, 2011; Sanders & Epstein, 2000). Numerous programmatic studies have been conducted over the years to identify the components of partnership program development that help to improve the quality of family and community engagement from one year to the next (Catsambis, 2001; Epstein, 2005b, 2007; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Sanders, 2009; Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Sanders & Sheldon, 2009; Sanders et al., 2005; Sanders & Simon, 2002; Sheldon, 2005; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2004). Other studies have identified approaches that increase outreach to engage more families in their children's education in ways that contribute to positive student outcomes (Sheldon, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009; Sheldon, Epstein, & Galindo, 2010; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004).

Seattle Public Schools (SPS) serves about 50,000 students, the majority (56%) of whom are non-White and with diverse racial, ethnic, socioeconomic,

and linguistic backgrounds. Four in 10 students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Nearly one-fourth of the students are in families that speak languages other than English at home. About 40% do not have Internet access at home. At the time of the study, the district had 12 regular high schools that received students from 10 middle schools and 10 K–8 schools. The district office includes a School–Family Partnerships Office and a School–Family Partnerships Advisory Committee that reports to the superintendent. SPS joined NNPS in 2008 for professional development and ongoing technical assistance in organizing and strengthening district-level leadership to guide SPS schools to engage families in ways that contribute to student success in school. As a member of NNPS, SPS receives training, materials for program development, on-call technical assistance, and services for annual evaluations of quality and of partnership program development at the district and school levels. Recognizing the need to increase family engagement activities by middle and high schools, the district decided to partner with NNPS researchers in a continuous improvement initiative focused on engaging families whose students are transitioning into high school.

The Continuous Improvement Family Engagement Initiative

The continuous improvement initiative was designed to build on existing key components of the NNPS framework. In particular, the NNPS framework involves school-based family engagement action teams composed of teachers, administrators, and parents (and students at the high school level) that meet regularly to create, implement, and evaluate a yearly plan of family engagement activities specifically linked to their school improvement plan goals. As the existing NNPS framework had not specifically encouraged middle and high schools to focus on students' transition to high school as a major emphasis in their work, this additional focus was the primary change introduced at the first stage of the continuous improvement process.

The regular NNPS training provided to school teams was adapted to include an emphasis on the high school transition and specific ideas for schools on how to plan activities for engaging families in this transition. In November 2015, the Associate Superintendent invited all district schools serving either Grade 8 or Grade 9 to send a team to a full-day professional development session on family engagement, the continuous improvement approach, and how to equip families to support their students during the transition to high school. A second full-day training session was held in January for schools that could not attend the first session. A district family engagement facilitator provided the opportunity for monthly coaching to schools as they planned, implemented, and reflected on their family engagement activities. Both district-level

leaders and school-level family engagement teams were encouraged to view the NNPS emphasis on evaluating each implemented activity and the overall quality and progress of the year's family engagement work as a regular "cycle of inquiry." This process aimed to encourage systematic information gathering and reflection to learn from each experience and to improve future planning and implementation of family engagement activities. In particular, teams were encouraged to focus on the ninth grade outcomes of attendance and course passing that increased family support was likely to influence.

Nearly half of the regular Seattle secondary schools (15 of 33) participated in the initiative during the 2015–16 school year. Fourteen schools attended the day-long team workshop, and a fifteenth school participated in discussions with the district family engagement facilitator later in the year. The size of school teams attending the workshop varied from one to nine, with an average of four members per school team. A total of 61 individuals from the 14 schools obtained formal training focused on engaging parents with students on the transition to high school.

The participating schools included 7 high schools, 6 middle schools, one K–8 school, and one 6–12 school. Most K–8 schools did not participate, echoing findings from a national survey of schools in which significantly fewer K–8 schools than middle schools "reported doing 'very well' in working with their partner high schools to prepare families for the transition" (Mac Iver et al., 2015, p. 35). This could be related to the fact that eighth graders are a small percentage of the students in these schools, and their transition to high school may not be a high priority for school leaders. Participating schools had significantly higher percentages of students who were non-White, ELL, and eligible for free or reduced-price lunch than in non-participating schools, as well as significantly lower average attendance rates (see Table 1). The participation of these schools may reflect their awareness of having greater numbers of students likely to struggle during the transition to high school.

Research Questions

This study analyzes the implementation of this continuous improvement approach to family engagement among district secondary schools during its first year of implementation. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How did participating schools differ in the steps they took around family engagement following participation in a day-long professional development session? What factors distinguished high implementation schools from lower implementation schools? (RQ1)

2. To what extent did schools believe it feasible to implement components of the family engagement approach presented in the workshop and subsequent coaching sessions? What challenges to implementation did schools identify? (RQ2)
3. What learning occurred for the district–university partnership team through the continuous improvement process during the first year? (RQ3)

Table 1. Characteristics of Participating and Non-Participating Schools, Year 1

	Participating Schools (<i>n</i> = 15)	Non-Participating Schools (<i>n</i> = 18)
<i>School Type</i>		
High Schools	7	5
Middle Schools	6	4
K–8 Schools	1	9
6–12 Schools	1	0
<i>Demographics</i>		
% White Students	30.9%	53.9%**
% Free/Reduced-Priced Lunch	53.4%	33.5%**
% English Language Learners	16.0%	3.6%*
Student Mobility	17.0%	11.3%
<i>Attendance</i>		
Average Daily Attendance	91.6%	94.2%**
% of students with fewer than 10 absences	54.9%	62.7%†

Significance of difference between group means based on *t*-tests from analysis of variance.

† $p < .10$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Data and Methods

Data were collected from several different sources for this study during the 2015–16 school year. The district shared data from its annual family survey with the university research team (see Appendix for details about the survey). School family engagement leaders from 12 of the 15 participating schools completed a survey at the end of the school year (for a response rate of 80%). The project ethnographer and other members of the research team participated in and gathered field notes of observations at 10 Partnership Executive Team meetings, 4 professional development sessions with schools, 12 meetings with school staff, and 10 family engagement events at the schools. These included descriptive summaries of what school leaders said during meetings

(including quotations when possible) and what happened during events. District staff supported by the project funding and partnering with the research team maintained field notes of weekly interactions with participating schools' staff and the other seven family engagement events observed by district team members, which they shared with university researchers in regular emails. Researchers also kept notes of regular phone conversations with district staff who were reporting on their interactions with school leaders.

Analyses of implementation data were conducted in several ways. Schools were systematically rated on various implementation measures, and we constructed summary implementation variables based on this coding. Field notes (including observation notes and photos from school events, notes from conversations with school leaders and attendees, and notes from team meetings and semi-structured interviews) were written up by project team members, and these notes were iteratively coded based on themes that emerged both from our own internal discussions and discussions with school leaders. These passages were used to draw tentative conclusions to the research questions, and these were discussed at project meetings with both district and university representatives to increase reliability. Whenever possible we attempted to triangulate conclusions through comparison of multiple courses of data, such as observations of events, interviews with school leaders, or conversations with parents at events.

To address Research Question 1, we used field note records on school-level activities to ascertain: (a) number of interactions involving discussion of family engagement planning or reflection with the district/university facilitation team after the workshop; (b) number of transition-focused family engagement activities implemented; and (c) whether or not the school team demonstrated verbal evidence to the district/university team of having attempted to follow a continuous improvement approach involving reflecting on observations after implementation of a family engagement activity. Schools were also coded on whether or not there was a school leader who demonstrated commitment to the family engagement initiative and whether the school had an actively functioning family engagement action team.

To address Research Question 2, we analyzed the end-of-year survey of participating school leaders to describe the distribution of opinions across schools about the feasibility of accomplishing key components of the family engagement framework in the following year. Comments from school leaders in the open-ended section of the survey and from field notes of informal conversations were analyzed to identify themes that could help explain the quantitative survey findings.

To address Research Question 3, we analyzed themes that emerged from field notes within the different components of the intervention (district-level coordination of family engagement work, school-level implementation of family engagement work, the relationship of the intervention to the NNPS model, and the relationship of the intervention to the framework of continuous improvement). These themes were discussed by the project team at the end-of-year retreat to uncover our own learning and were triangulated among project team members.

Findings

Variation in Schools' Responses to the Intervention (RQ 1)

Based on the coding of field notes of school activities following the workshop sessions, we identified four distinct clusters of schools based on the three factors identified above (i.e., interactions with the facilitation team, family engagement activities focused on transition, the adoption of a continuous improvement approach): (1) high engagement schools that engaged in all three components; (2) medium engagement schools that engaged in interactions with the facilitation team and transition-focused family engagement activities but did not adopt the continuous improvement approach (two of the three components); (3) low engagement schools that only engaged in interactions with the facilitation team but did not implement any transition-focused family engagement activities or adopt a continuous improvement approach (one of the three components); and (4) disengaged schools that immediately disengaged after the training with no further interaction with the facilitation team or implementation of activities nor a continuous improvement approach (none of the three post-training components).

Schools were relatively evenly distributed among the first three clusters, with just one school classified as disengaged. Three high schools and two middle schools were highly engaged in the initiative, showing evidence of adopting the continuous improvement approach to family engagement. Another group of two middle schools and two high schools representing two feeder patterns demonstrated a medium level of engagement in the transition-focused family engagement work (without actively using a reflective, continuous improvement approach during the first year). The third group of five schools serving either eighth or ninth graders demonstrated a low level of engagement in the initiative, participating in post-training discussions with district and university partners without implementing any transition-focused family engagement activities in the first year of the project. The disengaged school was a high-performing middle school that sent a full team of seven members to the

training workshop but decided almost immediately that it did not want to participate in the initiative. Demographically this school resembled many of the other district schools that did not participate in the initiative in the first year, with low percentages of economically disadvantaged and minority students.

Correlational analyses indicated that one factor that differentiated the low-engagement schools from the high-engagement schools was school leadership commitment to family engagement (coded from field notes of attempted discussions with school leaders). The Kendall's tau-b correlation coefficient calculated between the dichotomous measure of whether there was a school leader advocate for family engagement and the 4-point ordinal scale of school's level of engagement in the continuous improvement initiative was 0.78. Each of the high engagement schools had either a principal, assistant principal, or proactive family engagement-oriented staff member who was enthusiastic about working to improve family engagement activities. The other schools generally did not have a particularly enthusiastic school leader/champion of the work demonstrating eagerness to collaborate with the district/university partnership team to improve their family engagement work. Three of the low-engagement schools had leaders who did not seem particularly supportive of the initiative, which limited the ability of interested staff members to move forward in actively planning and conducting family engagement activities. One low-engagement school had a change of leaders that probably affected the school's attention to new activities.

Another factor associated with schools' level of engagement in the initiative was the existence of an actively functioning family engagement action team (similar to the Action Team for Partnerships in the NNPS model). Three of the five highly engaged schools had such a team, while only one of the less engaged schools had an actively functioning team. This school, coded in the low engagement category, was actively engaging families but had other family engagement priorities that superseded specific attention to the transition between eighth and ninth grade.

Using the district's Spring 2016 parent/family survey, we examined how eighth and ninth grade parents' characterization of schools corresponded to our categorization of schools in implementing the continuous improvement initiative in family engagement. Table 2 summarizes results of those analyses. Details about the survey administration and response rate are included in the Appendix. It is important to note that the response rate for the district-administered survey—although typical of district climate surveys (Astin, 2011)—was only about 20%, much lower than is desirable for ensuring a representative group of families. Regression analyses controlling for school level (middle vs. high school) indicated that parents at schools rated as *highly engaged* in the initiative

voiced significantly higher ratings of their schools' outreach to engage families ($t = 2.802, p = .005$), compared with responses from parents of eighth and ninth graders at middle and high schools that did not participate in the continuous improvement initiative during its first year. Similarly, parents at schools rated as *highly engaged* in the initiative voiced significantly higher ratings of their schools' cultural effectiveness ($t = 3.034, p = .002$) than did parents at schools not engaged in the initiative. Parents at schools *moderately engaged* in the initiative also rated their schools significantly higher in cultural responsiveness ($t = 2.340, p = .019$) than did families at non-participating schools. These positive relationships between our independent coding of schools' family engagement implementation levels and parental survey ratings of schools' efforts provide corroborating evidence of systematic variation in schools' family engagement efforts.

Table 2. OLS Regression Predicting Family Perceptions of School, Across Level of Study Participation by Schools (see Appendix for survey questions)

	Parents' Sense of Efficacy	Rating of...		
		How Well School Engages Families	School in Addressing Needs of Child	School's Cultural Responsiveness
Student in Middle School	-0.047 ⁺	-0.069*	0.007	-0.037
Low Study Participation School	0.029	0.027	0.008	0.042
Moderate Study Participation School	0.021	0.006	-0.006	0.065*
High Study Participation School	0.019	0.078**	0.047 ⁺	0.085**
	$N = 1,369$	$N = 1,367$	$N = 1,373$	$N = 1,359$

⁺ $p \leq .10$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Note: Standardized Betas shown

Reference categories: No Study Engagement & High Schools

Table 3 summarizes examples of transition-focused family engagement activities observed during the first year in a framework that distinguishes: (a) type of activities (events vs. other types), (b) the school level of the activity (Grade 8 or Grade 9 school), and (c) whether the activity was completely new for the school or an adaptation of an activity they conducted previously. This framework emphasizes specific components of guidance to the school teams at the training session. Guidance to the schools had included suggestions for types

of events appropriate for either middle or high schools as well as other forms of communication with families that did not involve attending an event at the school building (see, e.g., National Network of Partnership Schools, 2009). Schools were also guided to try completely new activities as well as to adapt and improve activities that they had conducted in previous years.

Table 3. Types of Transition-Focused Family Engagement Activities Implemented Year 1

	School Level	Type of Activity	Description of New Activities Implemented	Description of How Schools Adapted Previous Activities
Events	High School Events	HS events for 9 th grade families during school year		One HS had student-led conferences with “At-Home” video option for families who could not attend
		HS welcome events for new 9 th grade families		3 HSs paid more attention to planning for translation; 2 added information about importance of attendance and course planning or other helpful information; 2 added family feedback component
	Middle School Events	8th grade events to help prepare families for HS transition	Event prior to 9 th grade course registration to help families understand HS courses (2 MS)	
	Joint HS/MS Events	Joint MS/HS family activities	Adjacent MS/HS teamed up to host the course registration focused event together Another adjacent MS/HS pair planned new 9 th Grade Families event on same evening as MS Science Fair so families could attend both easily	
Non-Event Activities	MS	Interactive family activity	One MS tried the interactive family homework focused on HS transition	
	HS/MS	Communication tool	Creation of a refrigerator magnet with school information	School app for smart phones used by one MS and one HS; added info about HS transition

As expected, most family engagement activities observed during the first year were organized as events at school, although a few schools did focus on other forms of communication with families. Because high schools generally do something to welcome new ninth grade families and often also conduct parent–teacher conferences during the year, the high school events tended to be adaptations of previous activities. Engaging eighth grade families more directly about the high school transition was relatively new for most participating middle schools. We observed new collaborations between sending middle schools and receiving high schools, as well as new ways to help inform families more about the high school course registration process.

As a result of participating in this initiative, two middle schools for the first time tried a late spring event for families on the evening prior to the day eighth grade students were scheduled to enroll for their ninth grade courses. Previously this enrollment process had not involved families. One of the middle schools was located directly next to its feeder high school, which enabled eighth grade students and families to visit the high school and hear a presentation from the principal before meeting with counselors and completing the enrollment process at the high school site. At the other school, students and families were able to meet with counselors from the several different high schools to which students from this middle school were assigned. Both schools combined their events with a dinner and celebratory activities (e.g., student performances) in an attempt to maximize attendance, and each also included other important information for families at the event.

Several of the participating high schools also made improvements to their traditional spring welcoming event for rising ninth graders and their families. Three of the high schools engaged in more intentional planning for translation services for families who did not speak English. Two of the high schools included information for families about the importance of ninth grade attendance and course passing, as well as adding a mechanism for family feedback about the event.

During the first year of implementation we did not observe high schools engaging in specific outreach to their Grade 9 families during the year to support families in encouraging good attendance and course performance. We did hear from one high school, however, about its attempts to conduct student-led conferences and its innovative approach to include families not able to attend the conference at school by having students videotape their conference with a family member at home.

One option offered to eighth grade schools for communicating with families who might not attend an event at the school was a series of four interactive homework assignments that guided eighth grade students to discuss the

transition process and their plans for high school success with a parent or other family member. The approach was designed to engage all parents—including those unable to attend meetings at the school—with information to increase parents' engagement during the transition to high school and to suggest that parental involvement would continue to be important in Grade 9. The intervention was based on the *Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork* (TIPS) process (Epstein, 2017; Van Voorhis, 2003, 2011). The TIPS-Transitions activities guided student-led conversations and activities about attendance, grade point averages, course passing, and hopes for success in high school. Schools received versions of the four activities that could be edited by school staff to meet school needs. One participating middle school elected to test the new materials, and about 60 students and families participated.

We observed several other school and family communication tools implemented during the first year. These included the use of a school app that parents could download to their mobile phones to receive important school information. Other schools used another type of text messaging system and provided information at family events on how to enroll. One high school created a useful communication tool for new ninth grade families in the form of a refrigerator magnet (in both English and Spanish) with important school contact information on it, encouraging students to attend school every day.

School Leaders' Perceptions of Feasibility of the Family Engagement Approach (RQ 2)

Understanding how feasible school leaders perceive new practices to be is an important dimension of documenting and understanding the implementation process. Participating school leaders generally voiced optimism on the Spring survey about the possibility that they could accomplish key components of the family engagement framework in the following year. The survey (to which leaders from 12 of the 15 schools responded) asked about schools' capacity to implement both particular structures to support family engagement (i.e., creation of a plan; designation of a family engagement team of individuals, including parents, students, teachers, and administrators; a monthly meeting schedule for the team; commitment to meet with other schools a couple of times a year to share family engagement strategies; willingness to keep records on parent participation in family engagement activities; commitment to evaluating their progress and seeking to improve in a cycle of inquiry process) and specific family engagement activities. Their levels of optimism about feasibility varied somewhat depending on the specific structure to support family engagement and the particular family engagement activity type (see Table 4). Although three-quarters or more of the respondents believed they could

“definitely” implement several of the structures supporting family engagement (“develop a family engagement plan that includes the transition to high school as a major component,” “have a committee of teachers, parents, administrators, and students who work together to engage all students’ families to support student success,” and “meet a couple of times a year with teams from other schools to share ideas about family engagement and learn from each other”), fewer voiced confidence that other components of a well-functioning family engagement structure could be put in place at the school level. Just half (50%) thought it was definitely feasible to “convene monthly meetings of the school committee focused on family engagement,” though somewhat more (58%) were confident they could “keep records on parent attendance at activities and on other types of family engagement” (an important component for reflection and evaluation). Although a majority were optimistic about implementing most of these structures described above that support family engagement, just half (50%) thought they could definitely “engage in a cycle of inquiry with others at the school about how family engagement activities are working and how they can be improved” (the focus of the intervention).

Asked about implementing family engagement activities at their school, two-thirds (67%) of the responding school leaders thought they could definitely “implement at least three activities during the school year to reach families with students transitioning to high school,” and nearly as many thought it was definitely feasible for them to “provide information in an alternative form (e.g., print, email, website) to parents unable to attend meetings” (58%) or “hold meetings for families making the transition to high school on more than one date or at different times of the day/evening” (58%). The same proportion thought it would be definitely feasible to “implement a family training workshop about the district’s parent portal” (58%) or “help families without Internet access obtain the information they need to support their children’s educational progress” (58%). A sizable minority of respondents were less certain that their school could accomplish these family engagement goals.

Comments by school leaders on the open-ended survey questions and during informal discussions during the school year helped to illuminate the survey findings. In response to an open-ended survey question about “what would be useful in helping you and your school develop and implement family engagement strategies for the high school transition,” two family engagement leaders specifically mentioned the need for additional staff members. As one put it, “Everyone on the team in our school already has many other responsibilities, and the family engagement piece can get overlooked.” In our informal discussions with school leaders during meetings over the school year, the chief challenge that they identified in seeking to improve their family engagement

efforts was *staff time*. As one high school assistant principal asked pointedly during a discussion, “Where do we have time to do all this?” Another school leader explained bluntly, “I can’t have another plan.” The feasibility of a continuous improvement approach to family engagement and additional attention to the critical high school transition period appear to depend considerably on how school leaders view the resources available to them.

Learning from the Continuous Improvement Process (RQ 3)

The learning experienced by the district–university partnership team during the first year of implementing this continuous improvement initiative for family engagement during the transition to high school was extensive. We summarize our learning in four domains related to the intervention: (1) district-level issues that influence family engagement; (2) school-level issues that influence the schools’ ability to engage families; (3) issues that influence the applicability of the NNPS model to particular schools; and (4) how the continuous improvement framework can be applied to schools’ family engagement activities. These lessons were based on team members’ review of field notes and discussions at an end-of-year retreat.

1. District-level issues. Interactions with district leaders taught us that even when family engagement is closely linked to other district priorities, district leaders can lose sight of these connections and focus more narrowly on other district goals. The original plan for the partnership work was founded on strong district support for family engagement and “building a school system that closes opportunity gaps and ensures all students graduate prepared for college, career, and life” (Seattle Public Schools, 2013, p. 11). The district’s *Strategic Plan for 2013–2018* specified strengthening school–family–community engagement as one of three major goals for the district and its schools (Seattle Public Schools, 2013). Seattle’s School–Family Partnership District Plan emphasized how SPS’s participation in NNPS had shaped its approach to engaging families in their children’s education.

Although the district articulated its support for family engagement and emphasized a cycle of inquiry approach to instructional improvement in its workshops for school leaders, district priorities for schools were focused more directly on eliminating opportunities gaps for students of color. Even though district leaders occasionally articulated the connection between family engagement and this goal of closing opportunity gaps in meetings with the district/university partnership team, we did not see evidence of a district-level focus on improving ninth grade outcomes or significant district-level messaging (other than from the district Family Engagement Director) about the importance of engaging families to support student success during the transition to high

Table 4. Family Engagement Leaders' Perceptions of Feasibility of Activities

To what extent is it possible for your school to do the following things in the coming (next) school year?	Definitely	Probably	Not Likely	Impossible	Did not respond
Structures to Support Family Engagement					
Develop a family engagement plan that includes the transition to high school as a major component	83%	17%	0%	0%	0%
Have a committee of teachers, parents, administrators and students who work together to engage all students' families to support student success	75%	17%	8%	0%	0%
Convene monthly meetings of the school committee focused on family engagement	50%	33%	17%	0%	0%
Meet a couple of times a year with teams from other schools to share ideas about family engagement and learn from each other	75%	17%	8%	0%	0%
Engage in a cycle of inquiry with others at the school about how family engagement activities are working and how they can be improved	50%	33%	8%	0%	8%
Keep records on parent attendance at activities and other types of family engagement	58%	25%	8%	0%	8%
Specific Family Engagement Activity Types					
Implement at least three activities during the school year to reach families with students transitioning to high school	67%	25%	8%	0%	0%
Implement a family training workshop about the parent portal	58%	33%	0%	0%	8%
Provide information in an alternative form (e.g., print, via email, on website) to parents unable to attend meetings	58%	33%	0%	0%	8%
Hold meetings for families on more than one date or at different times of the day/evening	58%	25%	8%	0%	8%
Help families without internet access obtain the information they need to support their children's educational progress	58%	25%	0%	0%	17%
Make an already produced video on the transition to HS available to all families of transitioning students	42%	25%	25%	0%	8%
(Grade 8 schools only) Implement provided interactive homework activities for 8 th graders to talk with family members about the high school transition	43%	43%	14%	0%	0%

Note. Based on responses from 12 school leaders.

school. Besides the communication to schools from the district's family engagement manager, there appeared from our discussions with school leaders to be no other district leadership expectation that high schools connect systematically with their feeder middle and K–8 schools in helping to prepare families for this critical transition.

One symbol of this disconnect between family engagement and ending opportunity gaps was the district decision to eliminate schools' abilities to use a robo-call to inform all families of school activities or other important issues for students. This restriction was due to fears of litigation based on the interpretation of an FAA ruling about automated calls. Schools lamented this decision in their conversations with the project team throughout the first year. The rule was changed for Year 2, much to schools' relief. But the fact that district leaders did not send clear messaging to schools about how family engagement was closely entwined with other overarching goals for the district led some schools to give priority to issues other than engaging families.

2. School-level issues. Interactions with schools taught us about issues that interfere with secondary schools' ability to effectively engage the families of their students in the transition process and, more generally, in student success in high school. We summarize these issues in two main categories: (a) traditional reliance on the Parent–Teacher–Student Association for family engagement, and (b) availability of staff time.

Several school leaders were particularly forthright in explaining to us how the Parent–Teacher–Student Association (PTSA) was their primary family engagement arm. At several Seattle schools, there are multiple PTSA groups with different ethnic identities. These school leaders appeared to consider family engagement to be “checked off” their list of responsibilities, having delegated the work to these organizations. As one partnership team member who had talked with a school leader put it: “[This] school culture relies on a strong PTSA, so there is no big concern on anyone's part about parent engagement.” Although some school leaders did recognize that the PTSA did not reflect the diversity of families at the school, many leaders did not seem to embrace the need for the school to lead the outreach to all families with the goal of equipping families to support the transition to high school and academic success of their children.

A lack of staff time was a recurring theme in our conversations with school leaders throughout the year. Although some schools had funding to support a family engagement coordinator, most schools did not. The work of planning family engagement often fell to an assistant principal who had many other competing responsibilities. As a staff member at one high school confided during an informal discussion, “Family engagement is not a priority of this school.” Teachers were sometimes involved, but only because of their personal passion

for the issue. Teachers had so many other responsibilities that many were not willing or able to devote time to family engagement work. Only those school staff who were thoroughly convinced of the importance of family engagement work were willing to devote the time needed for it.

3. Using and adapting the NNPS model. Although Seattle Public Schools had previously embraced the NNPS model and organized their family engagement framework around NNPS principles, this had been emphasized and assisted mainly at the elementary school level. Convincing middle and high school leaders about important principles of effective family engagement was challenging. Most schools were resistant to the NNPS model of having a standing action team committed to meeting monthly to plan, implement, and evaluate family engagement activities. Only four of the participating schools had a functioning team. Schools had multiple mandated teams (School Improvement Teams, Equity Teams, Multi-Tiered Student Support Teams, etc.), and many felt it impossible to add yet another team to the mix. Schools with high levels of participation in the initiative but no standing family engagement action team had groups of two or three administrators and/or teachers who worked together in planning, implementing, and reflecting on family engagement activities. Parents and family members were rarely, if ever, included in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of family engagement activities, often because of scheduling issues. The NNPS emphasis on making a year-long family engagement plan seemed to be a major stumbling block for many schools. The idea of spending additional time to reflect on and evaluate their family engagement efforts was a foreign concept. The partnership team learned how to work with schools that were not quite ready to embrace NNPS commitments completely, in hopes of guiding them towards a better understanding of how these structures (particularly the creation of a year-long action plan and regular meetings of a family engagement team involving administrators, teachers, family members, and students at the high school level) would facilitate their work rather than make it more difficult.

4. Applying the continuous improvement framework. Our efforts to apply a continuous improvement framework to family engagement work taught us many things during the first year. As noted earlier, our learning can be categorized within the six improvement principles outlined by Bryk et al. (2015): (a) make the work problem-specific and user-centered; (b) focus on variation in performance; (c) see the system that produces the current outcomes; (d) emphasize measurement to improve at scale; (e) use disciplined inquiry to drive improvement; and (f) accelerate learning through networked communities.

In targeting the problem as students' ninth grade performance, we focused on the key transition year identified by many researchers as critical for student

success in high school. The “user” targeted by this work is the student’s family—or more specifically, the relationship between the student and family that results in improved attendance and homework completion during ninth grade. The goal for schools is to ensure that their students’ parents have all the necessary information and school support to be a source of family support to the ninth grade student. To engage all families, the first “users” of training to improve engagement activities are school faculty and staff members, parent leaders, student representatives, and others who work together on implementing family engagement activities at each school. There is, then, a complex set of “users” and a step-by-step process for schools to implement new approaches to engage all students’ families in the transition to high school. This complexity helps to explain some of the difficulties we encountered. Even if school leaders agree on the problem of ninth grade course underperformance, convincing them to include families in their plans to address ninth grade performance was initially a heavy lift.

Focusing on variation in performance is also a complex issue for improving family engagement. There is considerable variation in the ultimate ninth grade student outcomes of concern (i.e., attendance and course passing), and much of the variation is related to student background factors as well as to school-level policies and practices. It is difficult to measure exactly how school practices to engage families and other factors affect student outcomes. In the first year, it was too early to know if or how school practices of family engagement directly affected specific student outcomes. However, there was evidence of variation in interim performance measures—research-based “standard work processes” such as close coordination among sending middle school, receiving high school, and families (Crosnoe, 2009). As a partnership team, we began to focus on these standard work processes to identify malleable factors associated with the variation in school performance on such family engagement processes.

Our experiences interacting with district leaders throughout the year helped us to better “see the system that produces the current outcomes” (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 14). In particular, we saw that the system was not organized to bring together district leaders from different departments with school leaders to coordinate efforts to ensure successful outcomes for high school students, including family and community engagement. For example, a high school steering committee of principals was not ready to integrate family engagement and the focus on ninth grade outcomes with other items on their agenda. At the district level, there were few connections between the school–family partnership leader and the leader for community engagement or the leader for the district’s equity agenda, although a comprehensive program should integrate home, school, and community support for the success of all students. The often-referenced

silos between district office departments explain why few people seemed to understand the relationship between family engagement, student attendance, and course performance.

The emphasis on measurement in improvement science also spurred our thinking and learning during the first year of this initiative. Although we began the initiative with years of validated measures of family engagement from NNPS surveys, we found that different measures were needed. We were able to differentiate among schools' implementations of the continuous improvement initiative using qualitative methods in a way that corresponded to a district-administered survey of family reports about school practices of involvement, and we are working with the schools and district to co-develop measures that will be used for our ongoing study of continuous improvement.

Our experiences during the initial year indicated that it was possible to begin building a networked learning community, as schools were eager to meet together in a spring cluster meeting to discuss their activities and to learn from each other. Schools were willing to share experiences of success and of failure in the family engagement efforts. At the spring meeting, discussions among leaders from different schools were deep and rich as school leaders shared ideas and gave each other suggestions. When educators have been able to make the time for such meetings, they found them rewarding. We expect to track the schools' experiences of networking on family engagement for students' more successful transition to high school over the next several years to identify patterns and effects.

Implications

Although both researchers and practitioners have long affirmed the need for improved family engagement practices, this study is one of the first to directly link improvement science to work on school–family partnerships. Findings from the first year of implementation indicated both the possibility of moving secondary schools toward a more reflective approach to their family engagement practices and the challenges involved in getting schools to commit the time and effort needed to embrace a continuous improvement approach to their practice. The crucial role of the district messaging to schools about the importance of family engagement and its relationship to student outcomes emerged as a key finding. Variation in school responses to the initiative was also related to whether or not there was a school leader committed to organizing human capital in the building to embrace and carry out the mission of actively engaging families during the critical high school transition. Networking schools together to share their experiences in family engagement and learn

from each other in the continuous improvement process appears to be a promising strategy.

Being able to demonstrate a positive impact of family engagement efforts on student outcomes will be critical in helping to convince more reticent schools to embrace the work involved. Evidence that family engagement can positively affect attendance at the elementary level (Sheldon, 2007) suggests that we should also find positive effects of increased transition-focused family engagement on attendance in Grade 9, but the initiative is still in the early stages and there is not yet clear evidence of impact.

The next stages in our research will involve more focused attention on school-level implementation and the impact of school family engagement practices on attendance and course passing rates during ninth grade. In addition, we are analyzing the qualitative data from summaries of schools' reflections on their transition-focused family engagement activities in the Plan–Do–Study–Act (PDSA) cycle framework they learned during the workshop training sessions. Gaining a deeper understanding of the learning experiences of school leaders seeking to approach family engagement from a continuous improvement perspective will help advance the work of increasing the effectiveness of family engagement efforts, particularly during the critical transition to high school.

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Authors' Note: The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305H150081 to Johns Hopkins University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

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Appendix: Additional Information on Surveys

Seattle Public Schools conducts a yearly survey of district families. In April 2016, the family survey was emailed to all families who have an email address on file (approximately 80% of families). For these families, multiple email reminders were used to encourage completion. Online surveys could be completed on a mobile phone if desired, using the link provided in the emailed survey. When an email address was not available, paper surveys were mailed with a postage-paid return envelope. The district website reports that “paper surveys are sent in the language on file for the primary contact associated with the youngest child at a school, since this information is typically most accurate” (Seattle Public Schools, 2017, para. 8). Family surveys were translated into Spanish, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Somali, and Tagalog. Families without email addresses could choose to complete the paper survey, or they could use a link provided on the paper survey to complete the survey online. Only one mailing was used. Opportunities to complete the survey continued through June 2016.

Data for the target population of families (with 8th or 9th grade students) were provided to the research team. Responses were received from parents of 648 of the 3,559 8th graders in regular schools (response rate of 18.2%) and from parents of 722 of the 3,310 9th graders in regular schools (response rate of 21.8%). School-level response rates for 8th grade families ranged from 3.6% to 34.7%, and for 9th grade families from 4.5% to 34.4%.

The reported analyses were based on the constructs and survey question wordings:

	Cronbach's alpha
School Quality	0.901
The school is preparing my child well for the future	
Teachers and staff at school care a lot about my child's academic success and personal wellbeing	
Teachers at my school do a good job meeting the specific learning needs of my child	

The school provides a positive social and emotional environment for my child	
I feel my child is safe at school	
I feel confident discussing my child's education with teachers at school	
Culturally Responsive School Climate	0.799
My home culture and home language are valued by the school	
The school has successfully overcome cultural barriers between staff and families	
Teachers and staff at school are knowledgeable and respectful of different cultures and races	
Family Engagement	0.921
I have opportunities to influence what happens at the school	
The school partners with families to improve the learning environment at school	
The school encourages feedback from parents and the community	
The school is responsive to the input and concerns of families	
The school reaches out to families when decisions important to families need to be made	
There is at least one adult in this school I can talk to if I have a concern	
I am greeted warmly when I call or visit the school	
Parent Self-Efficacy	0.789
I feel confident in my ability to support my child's learning at home	
I know community resources that are available to help my child	
I know special programs available at school or the district to help my child	

Note: These scales are based on the Factor Analyses using only the items that loaded on a single factor. The scales are correlated with each other between .51 and .79

The research team also administered a spring survey to a designated family engagement leader at the participating schools. Most of the survey was newly designed to measure school leaders' perceptions of the feasibility of implementing each of the components of the family engagement intervention. The measure of feasibility was a four-point Likert scale measuring perception of the extent to which each component could be implemented (definitely, probably, not likely, or impossible). It also measured leaders' level of agreement with various statements about the value and impact of specific components of family engagement practices on student outcomes, as well as the perception of how well their school performed in various components of family engagement (using measures from the standard NNPS yearly school survey). It included an open-ended question about what schools needed for implementing family engagement strategies for the high school transition, as well as an invitation for any other comments the respondent wanted to make. Four school leaders completed paper versions of the survey at the conclusion of a spring meeting for schools to share their learning with each other, and eight school leaders completed an electronic (Survey Monkey) version of the survey, for a response rate of 80% (12 of 15 schools). Given the decision by other district schools not to participate in the initiative, the district did not permit them to be surveyed.